King of the ghosts

James Russell reflects on nearly half a century of doing psychology

And to feel that the light is a
rabbit-light
In which everything is meant for you…
The grass is full
And full of yourself.
(From Wallace Stevens' poem
'A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts')

Over the summer, facing retirement, I wrote a short semi-autobiographical book about psychology, calling it *Psychology as King of the Ghosts: A Personal Critique*. It is, in parts, a very negative book. I argue that like the rabbit who is 'King of the Ghosts' in the Wallace Stevens poem, psychology seems to have lost any sense it might have had of its potential insignificance. There is a kind of ego-inflation abroad.

Psychologists are everywhere these days; and they come unencumbered by modesty. Many of them take psychology to be the study of *what we are like and what we tend to do*. Turn on the *Today* programme and some psychologist will be telling you (inventing here) about his study showing that Moslem girls who opt to wear the hijab have a distinctive profile on the OCEAN personality test because… he'll make something up. Or that people who succeed in quitting smoking have children who are 76 per cent more likely to show ego-strength when it comes to marshmallows. Perhaps we should be glad they are at least using statistical tests, when set beside what is now called 'qualitative psychology'. Simply asking Afro-Caribbean women why they are going back to hair *au naturel* instead of having it straightened (*not* inventing here) is harmless, though sterile, journalism.

"Are we losing sight of the everyday miracle of competence/capacity that lies at the heart of psychology?"

James Russell *is Emeritus Professor of Cognitive Development at the University of Cambridge jr111@hermes.cam.ac.uk*

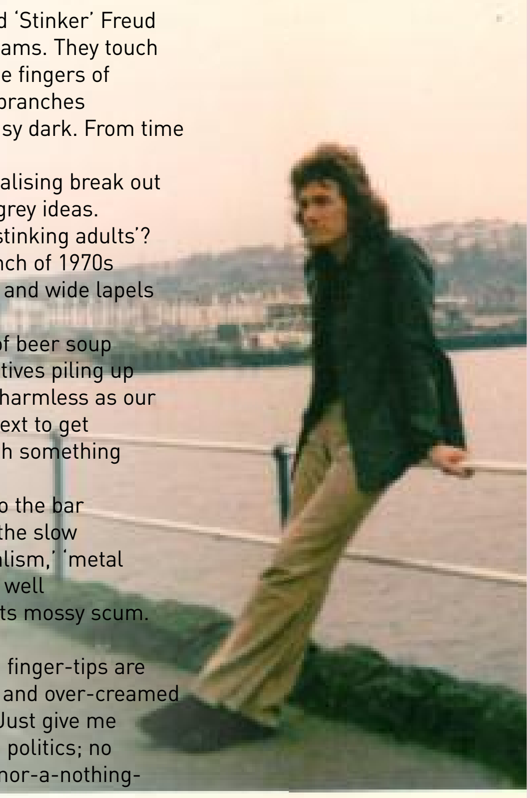
But when it is stirred up with Heidegger and the phenomenological philosophers you know that somewhere a rabbit is putting a crown on its head.

I am not talking about the clinical realm here: only the academic. So consider what we teach in universities – still. There's more than mere 'insignificance' at large. There is the nasty-banal Milgram experiment, hopeful nothings like Bandura's social-learning experiments, Skinner's ideas on language development (can these be taught with a straight face?), Moscovici's soufflé-like social representations theory. I'll stop there. The depressing thing is that material is probably taught more effectively than it was in my day. We get better at presentation and student support with barely a thought on whether students should be required to know this washy stuff.

Then outside academia, though sort-of inside too, we have what I call 'neurotrash'. Not neuroscience, but putting a cartoon of neuroscience findings to work in the service of a sexy and sellable story about our brains and us. It's garish and chest-beating and a nice-little-earner for people who hire themselves out as 'specialists in neuroscience' – perhaps to schools and companies. And between the territory inhabited by the likes of Paul McKenna and actual neuroscience there lies the wasteland from which sprout books usually written by journalists who may have done a bit of psychology ('neuro-linguistic programming' anybody?); but sometimes written by professors at good universities telling us, for example, that a lesson to be drawn from neuroscience and behavioural work is that, actually, we don't have a self.

There was another reason for putting 'ghost' in my title. I am a sworn enemy of behaviourism in all its forms but the word 'ghost' was also there as a nod to Gilbert Ryle's 'the ghost in the machine'. There is

The dead lecturer



I have tried the ideas of Sigmund 'Stinker' Freud
and those of Mark 'Stinker' Williams. They touch
me not. What touches me are the fingers of
air, skin of sound with cracking branches
and cracking limbs out in the busy dark. From time

to time I hear after-dinner mentalising break out
smothering the landscape with grey ideas.
For are we not John Ashbery's 'stinking adults'?
We can't get clean. We are a bunch of 1970s
psychologists with too-long hair and wide lapels

hunched stickily over our pints of beer soup
in dark and dirty pubs, the adjectives piling up
like similes. We are as vain and harmless as our
Peter Pan collars. Whose turn next to get
a talking topic in? Somebody with something

like a laser pen should burst into the bar
and zap us with noun phrases: 'the slow
triumph of self-interested capitalism,' 'metal
fatigue' are good ones. Might as well
try to coax a frog from beneath its mossy scum.

After a manicure hands sparkle, finger-tips are
white wide pads, seeming clean and over-creamed
slick with the prose of thought. Just give me
free-range twaddle, science and politics; no
to the grubby not-a-something-nor-a-nothing-
either. Thank you.

Please leave in an orderly fashion.

a plethora of 'ghosts' – individual conscious minds – but the very idea of The Mind, qua *the* conscious mind on a parallel with *the* physical world, is misconceived. The notion of the mind as a sort-of common-denominator or common-code of all our different perspectives, intentionalities, and dispositions makes no sense. But 'the mind' (in this sense) is a postulate useful to those who want to splash around telling us what we are like and tend to do. As Ryle rightly said, one can only refer to the mind usefully – I mean if we want to do science – as a set of functions. Which brings me to the more upbeat passage of my sermon.

If you look at the success stories in psychology over the past 50 years a clear pattern emerges. Successful psychology – by which I mean cumulative, substantial, satisfying – is done by people who don't investigate what we are like or what we tend to do, but ask *how it is that we can do what we can do*. This is the study of competence. This may mean tacit knowledge à la Chomsky, but more often it simply means capacity. We can see, hear, reason, learn, attend, plan, remember, use language, have appropriate emotional reactions; we can *think*. One kind of approach to these how-questions is in terms of development: what must we have within us, prior to experience, for development to be possible? I believe cognitive-developmental psychology from 1966 onwards has been a brilliant success story. (That's the year I started, and I would like to say I played a significant part in this; but in reality my career has been a labyrinth of wrong turnings and doublings-back.)

The rise of functional brain-imaging has helped here, but its influence was not *wholly* to the good, in the great cognitive scheme of things. When I arrived at Cambridge from Liverpool in 1987 all the talk was all of 'cognitive science' – cognitive psychologists, philosophers, AI specialists pooling their expertises towards explaining the greatest and most mysterious competence of all – thinking. I recall a meeting of everybody who was anybody in cognition in December 1987 in Oxford chaired by Donald Broadbent. But nothing happened because neuroimaging happened, in earnest. Maybe, with the rise of robotics, there will be a recrudescence.

I do not make a careful case for where to draw the line between good and bad psychology. Taxonomies can be dull or tendentious, and in any case who am I to do this? Instead I prefer to plot the progress of my own un-illusioning, keeping in mind that I am far from unique in this regard.

I started out, in my teens, thinking that psychology (a) was basically a humanities subject and (b) that it would give me wisdom about human nature. My desire for psychology sprang from an interest in Kafka, Sartre, Beckett, Dostoyevsky… anything on the 'existential' side really. When I began my PhD, the psychologist I revered was not Piaget but R.D. Laing. Yet I came to slice off the literary from the scientific side of my nature. I learned relatively late in my career humility before the facts – to be relaxed when Nature says 'No, No, No'– not minding if experiments failed so long as I got a clear answer; while typing up terrible poems in the evening (which grew less terrible, and indeed got published: see box).

Now I am having my psychology book published by the Knives, Forks, and Spoons Press, which specialises in poetry, not in psychology. Psychology publishers, indeed psychology agents, were unanimous in their indifference. If they replied to my e-mails at all, they said that there's no call for autobiographical books of this kind; not unless the author has Nobel-grade eminence. Winning a Nobel Prize was something I completely forgot to do.

I had tried in the book to emulate the authorial voice of Stuart Sutherland in *Breakdown*, but ended up struggling to balance the judgemental with the freewheeling-jokey with the poor-little-me. When it comes to psychology and its proper nature I am not given to nuance, not even given to the judicious googling needed to stiffen my opinions with facts. But I am convinced that the existentialism which drew me to psychology in the first place remains at its core, a small-hard residue, a cherry stone from the cherry-picked. A web of competences gives us free will.

To illustrate, when I worked at Liverpool I went to a lecture by Leslie Hearnshaw. In the course of rebutting one of Ryle's bad ideas (that psychology is basically formalised common sense) he unbuttoned and buttoned a waistcoat button. 'That I can do this,' he said, 'is a miracle that needs explaining.' Are we losing sight of the everyday miracle of competence/capacity that lies at the heart of psychology?